

## Search engines in the news



**Kerry Webb**

kerry.webb@alianet.alia.org.au

*Search engines are now so common that we don't even stop to ask what we did without them...*

Search engines are now so common that we don't even stop to ask what we did without them. But the developments keep on coming. Google, the biggest and most popular, has been keeping us guessing about the projected float of the company, but towards the end of January they announced that it was off — for the moment. It appears that the omens were not right, or something. But they have not all been off watching the stock markets: Google Viewer at <http://labs.google.com/gviewer.html> is a new way of using the search engine. Rather than a straight list of search results, you get a scrolling page where each hit in turn is displayed briefly. You can regulate the speed of the scrolling and, of course, stop it at any time. It's neat, and useful.

### ... it's also a people finder

Google can help with people's addresses and phone numbers in the USA. If your search string includes a recognisable name and locality, the search results list will start with the name and telephone number of that person.

### ... and another Australian contender

Mooter at <http://www.mooter.com/moot/> is still in a state of development (after its launch last October it had to be quickly tweaked because of an unexpected surge in usage) but looks like it is on the right track. It provides the answers in clusters of information — in a graphical map or with a list of groupings over to the left, similar to the way that Northern Light used to. Their business plan is based on sponsored links, but the sponsors will only come to the party if the product looks like it is a success. So far, it's not bad.

### But, if you want an archive...

The Internet Archive at <http://web.archive.org> has announced the ability to do keyword searches over a portion of its 'Wayback' archive database, of about eleven billion pages. Now, you may be lucky and find a time when the servers are not too busy. I wasn't. So I poked around the site and found their Web Pioneers section, where you can wallow in the nostalgia of early sites for Amazon and Yahoo and the first webcam of a coffee machine.

### Over there

Another new service that was a victim of its early success is the Aerial Reconnaissance Archives at <http://www.evidenceincamera.co.uk>. The site was developed by Keele University to make aerial reconnaissance photographs (deposited by the UK Ministry of Defence at the Archives) accessible via the internet. There are about 5.5 million photographs that were taken over occupied Western Europe by the Allies during World War II.

For several days after its announcement, the site was unreachable, and even now it is a cumbersome process (involving downloading a plug-in) to identify and access the images that are available. They are working on a better search facility, so stay tuned. And just to whet your appetite, here is a shot of D-DAY <http://www.evidenceincamera.co.uk/images/Large/dd2.htm>.

### ... and something similar

You can also get aerial photos (of a more recent vintage) at this US site <http://gazetteer.hometownlocator.com>, as well as maps, physical and cultural features, and census information. It would not take much (except money) to develop an Australian version.

### Still more on metadata

The Research Libraries Group conducted a Members' Forum in Washington DC and Chicago in December on Metadata and Institutional Repositories. Speakers covered a wide range of metadata standards used to describe, reveal and deliver electronic information resources, and this was followed by a discussion of digital repositories and how these repositories use metadata, with particular emphasis on Open Source software. The papers and presentations are at <http://www.rlg.org/events/haveandhold2003/index.html>.

### Colons, semicolons and style

I confess that I am interested in grammar and writing (and would welcome any feedback on the quality of the written English in this column) so this article from the *Chronicle of Higher Education* caught my eye: <http://chronicle.com/free/v50/i18/18a01401.htm>. It explores the rampant growth of colons and semicolons in book and chapter titles. I particularly liked the comment 'What the colon does in black tie the semicolon does in khakis'.

### Disputeinfo

The Victorian Department of Justice has developed a very useful site offering a range of information on resolving disputes — from basic communication and negotiation techniques, to resources for researching your rights, and options for specific disputes. The 'Step through your issue' section features unique interactive scenarios that provide a range of solutions to some common community issues such as fences, noise pollution and renting. By moving through guided questions and answers step-by-step, you receive easy to understand and tailored advice. Links to relevant legal and government resources are available at every stage. See it at <http://www.justice.vic.gov.au/disputeinfo/>.

### Putting a value on what you cannot do?

In 2001 IDC published a white paper titled 'The high cost of not finding information', and I do not know how many of us have suffered since then because we had not read it. It has now been published (presumably with permission — it originally cost US\$999) on the Monkey site at <http://monkey.biz>. In a significant understatement, the authors say 'Quantifying the cost of knowledge workers not finding information they need is difficult' but then, to their credit, they go on to formulate scenarios that attempt to calculate these costs. They also quote a 1998 study that demonstrates that knowledge workers spend more time unwittingly recreating existing knowledge than they do in creating new knowledge. The IDC paper is at <http://tinyurl.com/s5oy/> [[http://monkey.biz/Content/Default/Support/Resources/IDC\\_TheHigh-CostOfNotFindingInformation\\_1510.pdf](http://monkey.biz/Content/Default/Support/Resources/IDC_TheHigh-CostOfNotFindingInformation_1510.pdf)].

### Meanwhile, across the Pond

The British Library, in a more recent exercise, has been assessing its overall value to the UK economy. They used a series of carefully designed surveys based upon the Contingent Valuation technique. The result is encouraging: a benefit-to-cost ratio (for direct and indirect users) of 4.4:1 annually; and that does not count the benefit to non-UK users. See it at <http://www.bl.uk/pdf/measuringourvalue.pdf>.

### US elections sites

This year will be a big year for elections. Apart from our own little contests here, there is a certain amount of activity going on in the US. The Bureau of International Information Programs in the US State Department is continuing its excellent work in educating the global community about the workings of their government. They have two new sites: U.S. Elections 2004 at <http://usinfo.state.gov/dhr/democracy/elections.html> focuses on news of the candidates and election process, with newsletters, news articles, and links to candidates' biographies and websites; and for an introductory overview of the American electoral process, there is Elections 2004 at <http://usinfo.state.gov/products/pubs/election04/>.

### Full speed AHERN

The Australian e-Humanities Research Network has been awarded \$20 000 to prepare a web-based report that will include a stocktake of current e-humanities research in Australia. The report will identify both current projects in the humanities that use digital technologies, and those still in the development stage. The network aims to build a database of such work that is as comprehensive as possible. To check how it is going, or to contribute

any relevant projects, go to <http://www.acl.arts.usyd.edu.au/aehrn/>.

### Internet traffic growth

Andrew Odlyzko from the University of Minnesota is a frequent commentator on many issues relating to the internet. One of his recent publications is an analysis of traffic growth in various countries at <http://tinyurl.com/yvfto> in which he notes that 'the intensity of internet traffic in Australia is far lower than in the United States. Australia has 14 times fewer people than the United States, yet even when we adjust for this, we find about an order of magnitude less traffic per person than in North America.' He also shows that over the past eight years, Australia experienced several years of regular doubling of traffic (except for a mysterious slowdown in 2001). The question of whether these various figures are attributable to Telstra's charging regime is best left to the researchers, both amateur and professional.

### The online classroom

Online Teaching and Learning in Higher Education is a case study of the University of Southern Queensland's (USQ) approach to offering postgraduate courses totally online. Although it is based on the experiences of one university, the authors believe that the experiences of staff at USQ will have relevance to all institutions that are considering this sort of activity. See it at [http://www.dest.gov.au/highered/eippubs/eip03\\_11/default.htm](http://www.dest.gov.au/highered/eippubs/eip03_11/default.htm).

### FOI Online

The Victorian government has launched Australia's first online service for lodging freedom of information (FOI) requests, an initiative partly initiated by a forty per cent increase in FOI requests over the last three years. The initial plan is to have the service available for the ten state government departments and the Victoria Police, with eventual expansion to other government agencies. Currently, two of the largest recipients of requests are the Department of Human Services and the Victoria Police. The service is at <http://www.foi.vic.gov.au>.

### World Summit on the Information Society

As I mentioned in an earlier column, the Summit was held in Geneva last December and produced *Declaration of principles and plan of action*, which you will find at <http://tinyurl.com/3cd44/>. Many observers may feel that more action is needed (and it is!) but at least it is a start. ■

*The Victorian government has launched Australia's first online service for lodging freedom of information (FOI) requests...*